

Friendship in the Shadow of Technology

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Is having 5000 friends an indication of the truly admirable qualities of character that a person has? Or, is the very idea of having that many friends rather incomprehensible? Well, Aristotle held that when it comes to friendship at its very best—companion friendship, as we may say—no individual ever has more than a few companion friends. For he held that not only do companion friends delight in spending time together, but that a companion friend is rather like another self. However, it was more than 2000 years ago that Aristotle put forward his view of friendship; and it might simply be that times have changed, with the reality of Facebook friends (which can be up to 5000) standing as irrefutable evidence of the transformation that has occurred with respect to friendship. Moreover, so this line of thought might continue, an indisputable fact is that owing to technology human beings nowadays can communicate with one another in ways that were both impossible and downright inconceivable when Aristotle advanced his account of friendship.

In Aristotle's day, of course friends had to spend time together, since in effect that was just about the only way in which they could communicate with one another at all. But thanks to technology friends can routinely and frequently communicate with one another, though they are at opposite ends of the earth. There is email; there is Skype; and there are cell phones and social networking sites. Furthermore, people who live in the very same country have text-messaging available to them as a means of direct communication, although their domiciles may be separated by hundreds—if not thousands—of miles. As to Aristotle's idea of a companion friend being like another self, what more do we need as evidence of this than a friend using some form of technology to tell us that she or he agrees with us or is happy for us? Indeed, if a person chooses "Like" on a friend's Facebook page for just the right posting, is that not quite substantial evidence that these two individuals have lots in common? And is not that pretty much what Aristotle meant by the idea that a companion friend is like another self?

Putting all of the above considerations together, it is quite tempting to think that in view of modern communicative personal technology Aristotle's idea of companion friendship is a little outdated. What I shall argue in this essay, however, is that *au contraire* Aristotle's account of companion friendship has mightily withstood the test of time; and that personal communicative technology may very well be an impediment to the realization of friendship at its best. I set the stage by offering a brief story of an experience between two friends.

Here is a small portion of a cell phone conversation that took place about three years ago between Joshua and Neil whose companion friendship goes back many years (where the context for the call is that Neil had just landed in Paris and was calling Joshua to let him know that):

Josh: My father is in the hospital

Neil: Oh my, I must go and see him immediately

Josh: Ok, but I should tell you that my father
no longer likes black people

Neil: No problem. I am no longer black.

Joshua and Neil laughed and laughed and laughed together. Although that exchange between them

took no more than 12 seconds, it was a most majestic sign of the depth of their longstanding friendship. The very essence of Aristotle's view is that in spending time together friends constantly reinforce and affirm the depth of their friendship and, in particular, they gain much insight into one another's character as well as their own character. Of course, they do so in the obvious respects by helping, encouraging, and being supportive of one another in various ways. However, they also do in entirely spontaneous and unforeseeable ways that are tied to what is unfolding before them at any given moment, where what is so marvelously affirmed on-the-spot is the tremendous depth of their trust in and understanding of one another. And there is no way to know in advance the respect in which that affirmation will be take place. Neil and Joshua never supposed for even a moment that their ethnic differences were in any way a relevant, let alone negative, factor in their friendship. Just so, the 12 second exchange recounted above was as profound an indication as either of them could have ever wanted that their friendship beautifully transcended their ethnic differences.

It goes without saying that in ways that Aristotle could not possibly have foreseen that technology would one day play a pivotal role in the lives of individuals and, in particular, the in the way in which communication takes place between individuals. Indeed, this was not seen by many a mere generation ago. One reason why personal communicative technology plays such a pivotal role in the lives of individuals is that they can avail themselves of it 24 hours a day and 7 days of week in order to communicate with one another. What is more, individuals can do so just about wherever they might be. At first glance, then, it looks as if this technology is none other than the great facilitator of friendship precisely because it is the great facilitator of communication. In what follows, we shall see why things are not quite what they appear to be.

II. Communication and Communication

Significantly, while technology is undoubtedly the greater facilitator of communication, it is not quite the great facilitator of conversation. For example, the very advantage of the cell phone, namely that people can have it with them wherever they are also turns out to be one of its major liabilities in terms of being a tool for genuine conversation. This is because people tend to be doing something else while talking. Or, they are with other people or the surroundings such as street noise are an impediment to one or both individuals to the conversation being able to hear one another well. Consequently, the undivided attention that was generally characteristic of conversations between two people using that home fixture and "dinosaur" called the landline is far more rare these days with cell phone calls. To be sure, people can arrange to have a cell phone conversation between them, where each will essentially have one another's undivided attention. Typically, though, this will be because there is a specific issue that needs to be discussed; and that gives us a significant difference between the spontaneity of conversation that is characteristic of friendship. Good friends do not have an agenda for conversing with one another. Rather, they simply delight in one another's company and the conversations that flow from being together, whatever the topic turns out to be. Joshua had no idea that Neil was going to call him.

Now, to be sure, people can be distracted at home too. Still, by comparison to the cell phone, the probability drops considerably that a person called on her or his landline will be distracted. The rather interesting point here is this. There is a profound respect in which the landline at home served to nicely supplement friendship precisely because in general if a person spontaneously called to chat with a friend, it was often possible to do so at some length. By contrast, the cell phone does not supplement friendship to the same degree; and the reason for this is none other than the reality that in spontaneously calling a person's cell phone to chat it is not at all out of the question that, owing to

the very mobility that comes with the cell phone, the person reached will be in the midst of doing something else or will be in an environment that is not conducive to a good conversation.

The concluding consideration of the preceding paragraph perhaps points to an explanation for why texting and posting on social networking sites have become the preferred mode of communication between so many young people, as opposed to making cell phone calls. As a purely practical matter, it has become increasingly unreasonable owing to the considerations mentioned above to expect that a rich conversation will ensue with a friend if the person is reached on her or his cell phone. So it actually makes more sense to send the individual a text message or to post a comment on the person's Facebook page, since the message is apt to be read with greater attentiveness (when it gets read) than it would be listened to over the cell phone. Then in addition to the fact that individuals can communicate in this way pretty much whenever it pleases them, they can do so in just about any social context whatsoever: while at a concert or a restaurant; while travelling in a car or on public transportation; while waiting at an office or listening to a lecture; and so on. So it would seem that the disadvantage of the decrease in conversation is more than offset by the considerable increase in communication. If that is the case, then it turns out that texting and postings on social networking sites are comparable to the landline telephone after all in that they wonderfully serve to supplement friendship at best. As we shall see in what follows, the comparison fails mightily.

III. The Majestic Mutual Configuration

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that receiving a wonderful note from a loved one or a dear friend is typically something that we treasure. In fact, there is little doubt that receiving such note is generally better than having those words spoken directly to us. This is because in a reflective manner we can mightily savor the words of the note and recall in various ways the remarkable character of the person who wrote them without having to respond in anyway whatsoever; and there is something quite marvelous about that. What is also true, of course, is that notes like that generally are appropriate for only special occasions or defining moments in an individual's life. Such notes are not and cannot be an everyday occurrence. What is more, and this gets to the very heart of the matter, such notes are hardly a substitute for salubrious interaction between the two individuals in question. Quite the contrary, such notes are invariably borne of that interaction. So if texting and postings on social networking sites are a supplement to friendship, the support for this view cannot come from the significance that special notes have in the life of individuals. I have made it clear that I do not think that they are a supplement to friendship. I now turn to explain why.

The obvious question that needs to be addressed at this point is why is spending time together so important to friendship—so important that not even a wealth of communication between individuals via texting or postings on social networking sites can compensate for doing so? The answer is very simple, namely that it is only through directly interacting with another on a regular basis that we can get a genuine sense of the quality of character that a person has and the subtle ways in which it may be changing. For it is then and only then that we actually witness how a person behaves and reacts in real time to countless many things that the person does or that occur to the person or that the person directly witnesses: some to be expected and some not to be expected; some intentional and some not; some gracious and some not; some inappropriate and some not; and so on. We witness not only what the person does but the way in which the person does it. Likewise, we witness not just what the person says to various questions and comments in various circumstances but also the way in which the person says it, where this includes tonality, body language, and character of

the delivery. And in this regard, our assessment of an individual's character is refined and reinforced over time, resulting in what we might call a reliable composite picture of the individual's character. Two final points are in order here. One is that with face-to-face conversation it is possible for there to be enormous spontaneity, often occasioned by the surroundings of the moment that allow for friends to respond to one another in affirming ways that neither could possibly have anticipated. The other is that in directly witnessing a companion friend's behavior on a regular basis, it turns out that by our own behavior we thereby reveal to the friend the countless ways in which we take delight in and admire her or his character. Obviously, this goes in both directions. Accordingly, in terms of providing a composite picture, friends give to one another an affirmation regarding the qualities of one another's character that neither can give to herself or himself.

With regard to the above considerations, telephone conversations come in second because in a telephone conversation friends do not get to witness one another's body language. Just so, the vocal communication between good friends is most informative precisely because as has been indicated above how a person says something bears mightily upon how we understand what the person says; and obviously that can be determined over the telephone. Consider the wealth of assessments that we often articulate about a friend while talking with that person over the phone rightly based upon the tonality and delivery of the person is speaking: "Wow, I really got you going with that remark"; "You seem sad"; "I can hear it in your voice" (be it anger or bitterness or joy or sheer disinterest), "You seem distracted"; "You don't sound like yourself"; "I can tell you are really committed to the being there"; and so on. And we so often know that the friend is kidding just by the way the friend says something. So it was with how Neil heard Joshua.

Now, all this talk about friends bearing witness to one another's character would be rather mundane but for the ever so sublime truth that, owing to the trust that good friends have in one another, the observations that they make about one another, directly or indirectly, play a fundamental role in each coming to have enormous self-understanding and self-knowledge. For the obvious reasons, there are quite significant limits to what we can learn about ourselves from a brief interaction with a stranger, given that the basic forms of politeness are being followed. To be sure, it is hardly trivial to know that we come across as polite. But if that is all that a person knows about herself or himself, then that person's self-knowledge is very limited indeed. Some of the most profound insights that we can have about ourselves are gained through interactions with close friends and only through such interaction. These insights might include for example our ability to be observant when doing so really counts, the extent to which we are secure regarding an important social issue, our capacity to make substantial and sound inferences on the basis of limited information, our ability to show deep warmth without making a person feel uncomfortable, the extent to which our behavior elicits deep feelings trust on another's part, and so on. Needless to say, no matter how marvelously perceptive a person was yesterday or no matter how well the person behaved yesterday, or no matter socially malleable as individual was in just the right ways the days before, the excellences of the past do not render irrelevant being excellent in the present. And this simple truth speaks to what is so fundamentally important about the continual interaction between good friends. Thus, the interaction between good friends is not just a rich snapshot of the past. It is also a very rich and informed snapshot of the continual and evolving present. It is against the backdrop of this truth that we have quite substantial grounds for holding that texting and postings on social networking sites do not at all serve to supplement companion friendship.

Again, recall the exchange between Josh and Neil recounted above that endured all of 12

seconds. It is next to impossible to imagine that exchange being such an affirming experience if it had taken place via texting or postings on a social networking site. For one thing, the timing would be off dramatically; and so often in life the timing makes all the difference in the world. For another, there would not be the wonderful experience of mutual laughter between them that served as a deep, deep affirmation of the depth of the friendship. The following three smiley-face emoticons 😊 😊 😊 in a text message would of course be understood to indicate humor. Just so, it is clear that they (or a dozen more) would not even come close to standing in for Josh and Neil actually experiencing the rich laughter on the part of both that took place between them—the very laughter that served as a superb indication that the bond between them had been majestically underwritten by that 12 second exchange—an exchange which neither Josh nor Neil could ever have anticipated.

There is simply no denying the extraordinary wonders of technology as a vehicle for communicating information. The mistake lies in losing sight of the truth that in so very many instances what matters enormously to human beings is not just that the right information is communicated to us, but also the way in which we experience that information being communicated to us. Perhaps nothing brings this out more than the way in which loving parents say “I love you” to their infant child or, in general, the way in which a child learns a language. It would never occur to anyone to think that an infant child could learn the moral beauty of those three words by parents postings signs of “I love you” throughout the house, pointing at them, and then saying those three words. Precisely what we know is that a child learns the majestic meaning of those words by experiencing parental love when they are uttered to her or him by the parents. Notice, though, that long after the child has learnt their meaning, experiencing parental love when those words are uttered by the parents never becomes a trivial matter. More generally, it is never inconsequential that a person experiences the warm emotions that individuals have towards her or him when they utter words to her or him that are meant to be affirming. This is because emotional displays of warmth reflect the view that not just the correct words are being used but the reality that the corresponding configuration of sentiments is genuinely in place. This is precisely why a pregnant pause during a set of remarks owing to the depth of emotion can be so very riveting. For a gifted speaker, choosing the right words is often easy enough. Exhibiting the right emotional display, however, is another matter entirely. What clearly follows from these considerations is that putting the practice of texting and postings on social networking sights over a one-on-one conversation results in a seriously diminished form of friendship. Indeed, it is doubtful that such a form of friendship can ever achieve the depth of reinforcement that Aristotle’s idea of companion friendship occasions. I shall explain why in what follows.

One of the significant features of companion friends is their uniqueness. While no companion friendship may last forever, every companion friendship marks a defining period in a person’s life. Nothing ever seems to render inconsequential the time that was sent together. Not even another companion friend. And part of what is forever savored is none other than the time that was spent together. To be sure, they often did things together such as see a movie or attend a conference or show up at party. But above all they spent time together talking with one another and reacting in front of each to one thing and then another. By way of those shared moments each magnificently contributed to the life of the other. And in that regard neither is ever replaceable. If texting and posting on social networking sights are privileged over conversation as one of the key ways of interacting between friends, a question that very forcefully presents itself is whether by the very nature of things friends become far more replaceable. The question would surely seem to warrant an

affirmative answer, because the emotional affirmation that I have described is no longer being constantly underwritten. After all, a person can text a witty message or post a witty remark and yet be entirely indifferent to an individual; and everyone knows this. No doubt this is part of the explanation for why what matters so much to people nowadays is how many friends they have on Facebook, for sincerity and caring on the part of those responding has *de facto* become irrelevant since there is simply no way to monitor or determine such factors using these forms of communication. But this also means that people have set aside entirely or, in any event, seriously diminished the importance of one of the fundamental aspects of friendship described above, namely that of witnessing the visible emotional display that comes with affirming a person in conversation. Last but hardly least, insofar as communication by way of technology is privileged over face-to-face interaction, then the opportunities for the kind of extraordinarily affirming occasions of akin to the moment that took place Josh and Neil diminish precipitously. Taken all together, these considerations result in a configuration of friendship where by friends are far more replaceable than they were just a decade or two ago. Or to put the matter a quite different way and more correctly: Aristotle's conception of companion friendship is less often realized. A most poignant indication that perhaps friends are becoming replaceable in some important respect is the common occurrence these days of friends having lunch together spending a considerable amount of time texting rather talking to one another. Indeed, it sometimes occurs that one will be texting while the other is eating, with one texting utterly oblivious to the reality that the other person is just sitting there eating.

IV. Conclusion: Keeping It Real

To state the obvious, long before there was personal communicative technology there have been people who are disingenuous and insincere in their interactions with others. Yet, even these individuals realized that the appearance of being genuine generally served them very well. However, it would seem that recent communicative technology has changed the end game, if you will. So often very nowadays that game appears to be none than receiving and sending bits of information. And this is in keeping with the reality that so much texting and posting takes place in a context that is the very antithesis of an environment that is conducive to genuine reflection. Or, the person is multi-taking, as they say, which means that the texting and posting is hardly the person's number one priority; nor is texting or posting content that is indeed meaningful. Against this backdrop, it may very well seem to make far more sense to have 5000 friends the majority of whom one does not know and one could not recognize even recognize if one's life depended upon it, then it does to have two or three friends with whom the interaction has been so very rich that the interaction has served to redefine one's soul for the better. But, alas, this tells us something so very profound, namely that we have lost sight of one of the most fundamental social goods in life, namely companion friendship.

There is simply no denying the wonders of personal communicative technology. However, friendship at its best will survive only if human beings do not allow themselves to be so reconfigured by technology that they become indifferent to the deep and majestic affirmation that human beings can give to one another by and only by directly interacting with one another. If technology should get the upper-hand, then we who are human may become increasingly more like zombies than human beings. Any two zombies may send one another a million text messages a day. Each, though, will be ever so replaceable by another zombie. Accordingly, whatever they might be, they will not be and could not possibly be the kind of companion friends so masterfully described by Aristotle more than 2000 years ago.

I conclude with a question. If, as has been argued in this essay, communicative technology is

more of an impediment to friendship at its best being realized rather than an ever so rich supplement to it, does this portend the reality that such technology is unwittingly underwriting a more egoistic, and thus self-interested, mindset; for how can it be that has society allowed there to be even the semblance of a comparison between having 5000 Facebook friends and having a companion friendship?